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**An Analysis of the Effects Between Prison Documentaries and Popularity Among Viewers**

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**Departmental Honors Thesis**

**The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga**

**Social, Justice, and Cultural Studies**

**Examination Date: November 5, 2019**

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## **Abstract**

This research examines the themes between a variety of prison documentaries and the subsequent viewership. In recent years, documentaries depicting prison life have risen in popularity due to a number of factors such as violence, drama, hysteria, and an overall sense of fascination (Cecil, 2009). This popularity may have impacted views on the current criminal justice system considering most people never have contact with the criminal justice system in their lifetimes (Cecil, 2009). Therefore, these documentaries may serve as one of the only bases for information that they may have about the system (Cecil, 2009). Because prison documentaries are fulfilling the responsibility of informing the masses, it is even more important that they are accurate regarding any and all depictions and facts. Despite their importance, there has seemingly been a drop in the factual nature of these documentaries and the overall truth value in the inmate experience that is shown as these documentaries' popularity has risen (Cecil, 2009). The current study explores and examines themes within popular prison documentaries in order to determine the information provided to the public.

## **Introduction**

In the past, scholars have investigated the factuality of different fictional television shows and movies to expose the effect it has on viewers (Mackay, 2018). However, literature examining the effect that documentaries have on the viewer is limited. Many scholars have suggested that viewers assume all discussion in documentaries are 100% correct, which is why there is not much support to argue that documentaries may be having an adverse effect on their viewers (Mackay, 2018). In other words, instead of informing viewers about prison life for inmates and wanting to advocate on their behalf, there is a sense of complacency in believing that the inmate situation is unchangeable (Mackay, 2018). Moreover, viewing violent acts in prison documentaries has created a stigma that all people who break the law deserve the harshest penalties (Mason, 2003). The rationale for this is based on the fact that the inner workings of the criminal justice system are not as widely known. If a viewer sees violence happening across the board in prison documentaries, then they might be more susceptible to believing that is how violence in all prisons operate. Therefore, this research intends to examine more in depth the relationship between these prison documentaries and their popularity with viewers.

This research will examine eight different popularized documentaries on *Netflix* and evaluate different aspects of each to determine how valid their content is compared to their popularity. After listening in classes to the effect that prison documentaries had on the public, this thesis seeks to alleviate some of the concerns raised in these discussions. Moreover, the documentaries selected have been chosen using a convenience sample of what has been popularized in the media and what documentaries have been discussed in these classes pertaining

to this information. The aspects that will be evaluated are prison conditions, amount of feedback from viewers, number of views of each documentary, and how factual the documentary is as compared to national statistics. In order to best understand the validity of the documentaries, it is important to provide the current status of prisons in the U.S. based on several factors, including prison misconduct, substance abuse issues, prison work assignments, and the relationships between correctional officers and inmates because these are often themes of prison documentaries.

## **Literature Review**

### **Prison Misconduct**

Prison misconduct is a major factor in several of the documentaries that have been previously evaluated for this research (Loucks, 2004). Considering prison misconduct is typically shown as prisoners brutally behaving, it is important that the audience and viewers know a snapshot of what can actually happen in prisons. Moreover, prison misconduct can have an adverse effect on the prisoners and correctional officers. Examples of this are decreasing the overall wellbeing of the inmates and reinforcing a preexisting stereotype (Loucks, 2004). Therefore, the prisoners may act in an adverse way to combat their personal feelings. Notably, prison misconduct has occurred at higher than average rates since the 1990s (Loucks, 2004). Some attribute the growth in misconduct to the large increase in overall prison population (Loucks, 2004), while others attribute the growth to direct disciplinary conduct that takes place in many prisons (Sorensen, 2008). The direct disciplinary conduct is being seen as ineffective, so prisoners are not being properly reformed. Examples of this are militaristic discipline that takes

the form of strict routines and stricter rules. Other scholars attribute the growth in disciplinary conduct to unfair or harsh treatment conditions in prison, yet others assumed that the conduct was just (Camp, Gaes, Langan, & Saylor, 2003). Notably, the most common type of violence in prisons is inmate on inmate violence, which occurs at incredibly high rates (Camp et al,2003). The rates have only continued to grow in recent years as well (BJS, 2019).

Inmate on inmate violence can be described as the violent actions between two different inmates at the same prison. Some incidents occur due to gang affiliations, personal vendettas, and even racial animosity. Specifically, racial animosity has historically been a constant factor in the majority of violent attacks (Harer, 1996). In other words, race has been the basis for several attacks and has only continued to increase as the political climate outside of prison changes (The Marshall Project, 2017). Because of the historical background regarding race in this country, there are several outbursts of inmate violence on the basis of race in many prisons (The Marshall Project, 2017). Some examples even include black inmates feeling like they are constantly surrounded by those who only want their demise (The Marshall Project, 2017). These outbursts can take the form of regular fights or even stabbings, leaving many inmates wounded or dead.

Other studies found that those who were incarcerated prior to age 18 are more likely to violate prison rules in the form of prison misconduct (Kuanliang, Sorensen, & Cunningham, 2008). The rationale for this stems from the plethora of stressors that are present in the prison system while juveniles are incarcerated such as internal suppressions, violence, and guilt. These factors lead to an overactive need for these juveniles to want to protect themselves while in the system (Kuanliang, Sorensen, & Cunningham, 2008). On the other hand, those who enter the criminal justice system after the age of 18, seem to be less likely to break the rules and act out.

This stems from a more mature mindset on behalf of those who are older inmates, because they have been present in the system for so long and they know what the repercussions are for acting out. Additionally, the older inmates, regardless of the crime they are charged with, desire to separate themselves from the younger crowds, which leads to less misconduct within the system (Kuanliang et al., 2008).

Another aspect is how violence impacts women in prisons. Compared to men, women have fewer instances of fights and overall violence. However, based on the research, over 40% of women wanted more control and more infractions to keep everyone in line, which speaks volumes to how the women want the rigid nature to affect them (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2009). This stems from the high amount of inmate on inmate violence throughout prisons, even though this type of violence is not as large of a factor for women as it is for men. For instance, the most common type of violence for men is inmate on inmate violence, while for women inmate on inmate violence is not in the top category (Camp et al., 2003).

### **Substance Abuse Issues**

Another major facet of prison documentaries is the depiction of drugs for prisoner consumption and other substance abuse issues. For the majority of the documentaries, the widespread network of drugs and how prisoners use it are not as widely shown. However, the aftermath of drugs affecting prisoners are shown as it relates to their overall experience in prison. In other words, the background information is not present during the documentaries, so uninformed generalizations can be created. The drug dependencies of prisoners does not seem to start within the prisons, rather it is a problem before inmates come into prisons. More



specifically, there has been detailed information to suggest that there are rigorous drug programs within prisons to alleviate substance abuse problems that people have struggled with long before being incarcerated (Inciardi, Martin, Butzin, Hooper, & Harrison, 1997). To combat this problem, many state prisons have developed quasi-rehabilitation programs (Belenko & Peugh, 2005). Examples of this are programs to aid with social and mental health problems. However, the predicament facing prisons is determining how many programs are necessary to meet the ongoing demand for more inmates to use these programs.

There has also been some speculation as to why these programs are needed, because it is expected that people in prisons are in their correct state of mind. In other words, this begs the question of whether or not drug addictions affect a person's mental health and whether or not that affects the crime that the person commits. Across many areas of study, the barriers to implementing proper drug rehabilitation programs has been rampant, but the main barriers still continue to revolve around maintaining the programs, estimating the number of programs needed, and prioritizing between what programs will be utilized more (Farabee, Prendergast, Cartier, Wexler, Knight, & Anglin, 1999).

Additionally, many of the crimes that people in the current society are charged with revolve around drugs, yet there are few programs to combat the issue (Belenko & Peugh, 2005). If the system seeks to truly rehabilitate those that have committed drug offenses, then there should be a larger focus put on why the drug crime was committed and how it should be solved (Belenko & Peugh, 2005). Moreover, our society has shifted towards more drug crimes, yet the treatments have not shifted as well. Drugs are prevalent inside and outside of prisons, so this only continues the process of people being addicted to drugs. Specifically, in the documentaries

the possibility of seeing inmates using drugs illegally or legally is possible, so this is a point that will need to be further examined.

In order to adequately describe the problem, it is important to note that about half of inmates in prison have a substance abuse problem (Prisoner Health, 2019). Moreover, data shows that 63% to 83% of inmates had a substance in their system at the time of their arrest (Prisoner Health, 2019). More specifically, if the topic is examined by gender, data shows that 56.9% of males in prison are dependent and 69.2% of women are dependent on substances (Bronson, Stroop, Zimmer, & Berzofsky, 2017). In terms of race, white inmates have the largest substance abuse problem with 62.3% of white inmates facing the problem (Bronson, et al, 2017). This group of inmates is by far the largest of all the racial/ethnic groups. Additionally, when compared by age groups, 18-24 year old inmates experience the largest number of substance abuse problems with 64.2% of the group experiencing the problem (Bronson, et al, 2017).

### **Work Assignments**

While the violence and the drug problem in prisons is important, the work assignments that inmates are given provide substantial context. The types of assignments that are given can suggest what potential the prisons believes each inmate possesses. Additionally, it can be a way to pinpoint areas of discrimination, like giving women more domestic work assignments. In many of the documentaries, these assignments are small details that frame each form of media, while also giving audiences a clue into a few key characteristics of each prison. Moreover, within prisons, work assignments are common. For inmates, the type of work assignments they are assigned to can vary greatly. Additionally, the pay that accompanies it depends on what type of grade a particular inmate is. However, each inmate does not make more than \$1 an hour

(Prisoner Resource, 2018). The most common jobs that inmates can have is food service, warehouse work, work as an inmate orderly, plumber, painter, or groundskeeper (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2018). Despite the stark differences within male versus female prisons, the jobs seem to be fairly the same. Unlike the real world, inmates do not have a choice on whether or not they work in the prisons. According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, all inmates must work if they are medically able to do so.

For women, while on the surface these work assignments are incredibly similar to the description of men, there can be significant differences. For instance, women who birth children while in prison in New York State prisons must schedule arrangements with the prisons to take care of their young children while they are working (Morash, 2002). Additionally, studies have shown, that when looking across the U.S., men and women's work assignments in prison tend to mirror stereotypical work functions they complete in general society, (Crittenden, Koons-Witt, & Kaminski, 2018). For instance, women have higher odds of being assigned to tasks that have historically (and currently) been deemed as "feminine" or women's work such as laundry (Crittenden et al., 2018). On the other hand, men are assigned more hands-on tasks like farming or public works, which falls in line with the stereotypical notion that men should do jobs that include more heavy-lifting (Crittenden et al., 2018). Therefore, while there is some indication that the jobs across male and female prisons are similar, there is also evidence that they may be assigned to these jobs in somewhat stereotypical ways.

## **COs/Inmate Relationship**

Arguably, the most important aspect of prison life is the relationship between the inmates and the correctional officers and it is important to clarify the deep-rooted association that inmates and correctional officers have with one another. There is a stigma that correctional officers solely attack inmates for unfair and unnecessary reasons (Morgan, Van Haveren, & Pearson, 2002). Examples of these attacks are verbal attacks and even physical ones depending on the correctional officer. Major research suggests that there may be more parallels between inmate on inmate violence and how that creates the relationship between inmate and correctional officer violence. Additionally, correctional officers have used their force and power to use other inmates to do their “dirty work” (Morgan et al., 2002). This can be seen in prisons like St. Clair Correctional Facility where stabbings are an everyday occurrence to maintain order inside (St. Clair Correctional Facility, Inmate, 2018). In other words, the inmates may be recruited by correctional officers to harm other inmates who may be causing problems in the prison. This may happen in an attempt to keep the correctional officers’ hands clean of any crimes against the inmates, while still working to maintain order within the facility. Moreover, there has been a focus on more punitive measures to control inmates and this can be seen in the era of the “get tough movement”. Examples of this are harsher penalties for different crimes, including the emphasis on the drug problem in the United States.

## **Composition of Prisons**

Finally, the composition of prisons is important when noting how overrepresented the minority population can be. Additionally, this information also suggests that in order to create

documentaries to appeal to the mass population, they may tend to over represent certain groups of people. Overall, the rate for those in prison was 582 per 100,000 U.S. residents age 18 or older in 2016 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2016). Notably, in 2016, the imprisonment rate was down 2% from 2015, making it the lowest observed rate since 1997 (BJS, 2016). At year-end 2016, only about 1% of U.S. adult males were serving prison sentences of more than 1 year which came to a rate of about 1,108 per 100,000 adult male residents (BJS, 2016). From 2015 to 2016, while the imprisonment rates for all races decreased, the rate for black adults was down 4%, compared to the 2% for all prisoners(BJS, 2016). When examining a larger period of time, the rate for black adults imprisoned declined 29% from 2006 to 2016 (BJS, 2016). These statistics speak volumes to how overrepresented minorities are in prisons and how this has led to their overrepresentation in several of the documentaries examined. Moreover, given the historical implications in our society (i.e. enslavement of African-Americans and subsequent discrimination), these statistics also show the shift from overt to covert racism and discrimination for minorities.

The vast majority of inmates in the U.S. are male (BJS, 2016). Additionally, in raw numbers, there are significantly more white females than black females incarcerated in state and federal prisons (BJS, 2016). Yet, the rate of imprisonment was significantly higher for black females, nearly doubling the rate for white women (BJS, 2016). This is a trend that has been noted for quite some time, particularly after the initiation of the War on Drugs which has often been referred to not only as a war on women, but even more specifically, as a war on black women (Bush-Baskette, S.R., 2004). There seems to be a trend that black males and females are imprisoned at higher rates than their white counterparts, which creates even more racial

disparities. More specifically, black males were 11.8 times more likely to be imprisoned than white males (BJS, 2016). While the majority of state prisoners, in general, are serving time for violent offenses, the majority of women (56%) in state prisons are currently serving time for a drug offense (BJS, 2016).

### **Media Importance**

Although this topic is relatively new, there is some research on how the effects of fictional television shows and media contribute to the general opinions of the public in reference to criminal justice reform (Cecil, 2009). Moreover, a portion of this research focuses on how news stations in particular contribute to these fictional shows about prison and it suggests that “only 17% of the crime stories in news stories covered correctional institutions” (Cecil, 2009, p. 20). In other words, the news outlets that writers and directors rely on are only receiving information on about less than a fourth of the overall prison population. More often than not when this happens, the focus tends to only rely on the information that is negative about prisons, because those are hot-button topics (Cecil, 2009). Examples of this can be prison violence or even reform because of the violence; people tend to be drawn to the negative stigma from prisons. Additionally, these shows that offer an inside look at prison life like *Lockup* create the sense that “the line between fact and fiction is blurred” (Cecil, 2009). Rather than take an informative, holistic look at prisons, these quasi-fictional shows only appeal to the entertaining nature of television, which tends to paint prison life and inmates in a negative light. Some may argue that viewers can easily differentiate between what is highly dramatised and what is reality. This suggests that audiences do not know the subjective factors that are used to create a good television show that can appeal to viewers all across America. Unfortunately, the reality of the

matter is correct information is not what makes money in this industry, but dramatization and widespread violence does.

Another major hindrance to the potential realities that could be presented in prison documentaries and television shows is how media outlets obtain the information about the inmates. Sometimes it is hard to imagine the realities of what goes into collecting the information, but the information can only be obtained by the men and women who extend “their arms and hands reach outwards, craving sunlight and the integrity granted by the camera’s lens” (Mackay, 2018, p. 12). In other words, these inmates do not know that their images, thoughts, and feelings will be twisted and molded to fit into thirty minute segments of dramatized information. The meaning behind these shows would be different if it were unfiltered and focused on the inmates’ struggles in these tiny cells; however, television shows documenting prison life spend a large portion focusing on the prison violence. More specifically, there is an “overwhelming number of African-American bodies on camera”(Mackay, 2018, p. 20) in these shows . As suggested by Cecil (2009), the rationale for the high increment of African-American males in these shows is to appeal to the comfortability of this nation who is accustomed to consuming entertainment at the hands of poor treatment of African-Americans. Mackay (2018) suggests that this stems from the foundation and the fabric of this country where everything was handed to the Europeans who abused African-American labor, talent, and intelligence to build this country . Despite being taken from their country and forced to work for Europeans, African labor never received the recognition it deserved and has sense blended into how African-American people are trended on a daily basis. The stigma of violence surrounding inmates, African-American inmates in particular, suggests that prison television shows are no

different than the values of our country. In other words, our country sought to exploit minorities for their own gain, and the media industry seeks to do the same by exploiting every negative image they can possibly garner of African-American inmates in particular.

Additionally, an aspect that is not as obvious to the relationship between popularity and prison media is the effect that it has on the viewer. Most people after viewing a television show or documentary are hesitant to discuss the takeaways of the meaning of the message; however, the meaning to many television shows depicting prison is arguably the most important. Mason (2003) suggests that “many people have had no direct contact and experience with the criminal justice system” (p.10 ), so the effects from these different media sources play a large role in their relationship with the criminal justice system. Additionally, this influences American views on criminal justice reform, which can cause backlash for inmates and those affected by the criminal justice system. For example, if someone views multiple instances of inmate violence against a correctional officer, then they will assume that inmates are innately violent. Moreover, this could lead to this viewer desiring harsher penalties and laws for those who are in prison and who will be sentenced. The problem with this is that their view is not well-informed, because they are only seeing the highly dramatized and popularized view of prisons (Mason, 2003) which they are typically consuming for entertainment rather than informative purposes. In other words, the research tends to suggest that if television shows depicting prison life is all viewers have to base opinions on the criminal justice system, then is that an opinion at all (Cecil, 2003).

### ***Current Study***

Based on the research that has currently been presented, it is apparent that not much research exists on the overall effect of specifically documentaries centered on prison life. Most



documentaries seek to teach viewers about issues to which they may be ignorant. Moreover, because of the complexities surrounding the criminal justice system and the heavy amount of dramatized prison shows, the stigma surrounding the overall nature of prisons does not have the greatest reputation. Therefore, based on the research, it seems that prison documentaries set viewers into believing that whatever is presented is fact, because the general population does not come into contact with the criminal justice system (Mason, 2003). The current study seeks to add to the literature by examining the major themes of popular documentaries available on *Netflix*.

## **Methods**

For this study, each documentary was predetermined using convenience sampling based on recommendations from classes and various students, which would tend to indicate popularity and widespread dissemination. The documentaries selected were *13th*, *Lockup*, *Girls Incarcerated*, *Evolution of a Criminal*, *Hard Time*, *Inside the World's Toughest Prisons*, *Making a Murderer*, and *I am a Killer*. Each documentary was evaluated using the same variables to explore their popularity and their factuality. The variables are the amount of viewership, the content of comments from viewers (the comments will be coded for positive versus negative commentary), the content of facts as compared to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and the descriptions of prison life. To address these variables, this study takes an in-depth view into each documentary and codes for each of the variables. First, each documentary was watched and initial notes were taken regarding each documentary by the researcher. Next, comments and viewership were evaluated for each documentary to find correlations between what was said and how viewers reacted. Finally, each documentary was examined once more to solidify similar

themes and different themes by the same researcher. This type of study is referred to as a discourse qualitative analysis because of the study's flexibility and utility in understanding how reality was constructed in the documentaries, while emphasizing the larger ramifications of the documentaries (Jensen & Laurie, 2016).

### *Analysis/Findings*

#### *Viewership of Each Documentary*

Previous research has found extreme bias and implications evident in television shows that depict prison life and the results of this research seem to be no different (Jensen & Laurie, 2016). The first finding revolves around the amount of viewership of each documentary. The expected results were that *Lockup* would be the most popular of the eight documentaries, due to its entertainment value, the network where it is screened, and the amount of violence presented on the media platform. As expected, *Lockup* had the most views on average between the eight documentaries with an "average of 263,000 views per episode" (Curry, 2011). Following *Lockup*, *13th* seemed to be the most popular documentary in terms of viewership. More specifically, in *13th*, this documentary had many positive comments from those who are in the actual field of criminal justice, which seemed to contribute to the overall high viewership. Moreover, these comments revolved around the gratitude for putting an emphasis on the wrongdoings of America, especially regarding African-Americans and the criminal justice system. For example one comment read, "Ava DuVernay's analytical and passionate documentary traces the current-day mass incarceration of black Americans to its historical

origins in the Thirteenth Amendment, which banned slavery and involuntary servitude “except as punishment for a crime” (Brody, 2016).

However, each of the other documentaries seemed to receive the same amount of viewership. It is important to note that for *Evolution of a Criminal*, the viewership from the documentary suggests that while critics rated it highly, viewers found it to be unrealistic. Examples are critics claimed it was insightful and showed the criminal perspective from a different lens, while other pointed towards how the scenario never happens to anyone. A potential reason for this juxtaposition in comments may be because it shows a very truthful look at the experience of African-Americans in particular in the criminal justice system. Another documentary that received average views, but still received notoriety is *I am a Killer*. Moreover, there seemed to be several viewers who loved *I am a Killer*, despite the fact that relating to someone on death row proves more difficult than relating to someone who has a simple drug charge. For instance, “What *I Am a Killer* recognizes, and capitalizes on, is the fact that we’re morbidly fascinated by those who’ve chosen to take someone else’s life” (Torres, 2018). Based on in-depth research into each of the shows, it is evident that viewers gravitate toward shows they can relate to. In this instance, it is very surprising how relatable the series came across to viewers. Examples of the comments included people saying they have had similar questions about the aggression of others and how they would react, but viewers found it interesting that the inmates in this documentary actually reacted on those feelings. The show that received the least amount of viewership was *Inside the World’s Toughest Prisons*; it is not the most popular, but that could be for a plethora of reasons. One possible rationale is that the practices and policies in other countries do not affect Americans, so there may not be as much demand for the series.

### ***Comments Regarding Each Documentary***

One factor that appeared as troubling when researching the commentary of *Lockup* was the meaning that the documentary created. Rather than informing audiences or creating a deeper engagement with the criminal justice system, many of the comments were complimentary of the writers and directors of the documentary for being brave enough to go into the prisons. For instance, “I often get questions from people saying, I can’t believe that actually happened, I can’t believe you were actually there,” executive producer Jim Cirigliano” (Dehnart, 2015). Therefore, the research suggests that this documentary appealed more to entertainment value, rather than be highly informative. Moreover, it suggests that this documentary would sway viewers’ opinions of the criminal justice system in a more negative manner, because empathy is given more towards the directors and the guards at these facilities. One major example is in *Hard Time* where the series received praise from viewers and critics alike. Most of the commentary shows that more than 90% of viewers liked the show, which means that at least 90% of viewers have probably been affected by the negative stereotypes of inmates. In other words, the stereotypes presented in the documentary may have made a thorough impact on what viewers may believe of minorities in prison. Examples of this can be seen in *Girls Incarcerated* where the majority of the comments discussed the emotional journey that the viewers went on when watching the documentary, which suggests that there is a clear connection that is formed between the girls and the viewer when watching the show. For instance, when viewers are shown one of the girls giving birth while in prison, they may sympathize with the fact that her child will not have a normal life. However, this connection does not extend into the informative nature of the documentary.

Another example can be seen in *Evolution of a Criminal* where an informed viewer may be able to view this documentary and understand that it only relates to this specific family, an uninformed viewer could see this as how all lower income families are. On the other hand, in *Making a Murderer*, the positive comments were based on the provocative nature of the documentary and led to the documentary receiving numerous views and praises. For instance, “Each development was more outrageous than the last and could have easily been scripted by Hollywood. The cast of characters was seemingly lifted out of a conspiracy thriller” (Lawler, 2018). After a cursory glance of comments and views, over 90% of the viewership responded positively to the contents of the series. The overarching question is why can such a variety of documentaries about prisons have such a high amount of positive comments? Based on the analysis, it seems to be the differentiation in shock value or emotional draw for many of the documentaries.

### ***Intentions v. Outcomes***

For many of the documentaries, the overall intentions of the directors and producers seemed to be to inform audiences of what happens inside prisons from an objective lens. However, because each person holds innate biases, there can be no way to have an objective outlook on each and every aspect of what may be filmed. Within many of the documentaries, there were themes of the actual outcomes not matching the intentions. For example, In *13th*, there were few instances depicting any prison life. The majority of the documentary focused on facts and opinions of experts, while showing short movie clips from popularized movies describing the racial inequality in America. Based on the low number of scenes with current inmates, it is easy to see that the documentary sought to be as formal and informative as possible.

Moreover, the lack of film about inmate experience provided a more objective view of prisoners and inmate violence.

On the other hand, in *Lockup*, the entirety of the documentary is based around prison life, so it was not difficult to discover instances of how the inmate experience is depicted. While viewing and researching this documentary, there were several negative occurrences that happened on the show, such as inmate v. guard violence. Additionally, these instances were typically shown alongside a punishment for the inmate that was harsher than it should be. For example, there was one instance where an inmate used profane language towards a guard and was put in isolation. This punishment does not fit the crime and seeks more to be entertaining towards audiences who are watching at home. Another thing to note in *Lockup* was the number of facts shown as compared to *13th*. In *Lockup*, there were facts about the prison system shown when depicting an inmate or group of inmates that were relatively new to the show. Based on past research, this can be seen as a highly effective tool when trying to inform audiences of different prison statistics (Cecil, 2009).

In comparison with *Lockup* and *13th*, In *Girls Incarcerated*, there seemed to be no hidden bias innate within the documentary because it focused solely on the day to day lives of the juveniles. Additionally, there were few statistics shown throughout the documentary, but many of the facts were stated through the girls' interaction with the film directors. Another very similar outlook is in *Making a Murderer*, the main characters, inmates who have committed heinous crimes, are shown through an in-depth look. Beginning with the first episode, the documentary seems to express the rationale behind why criminals commit crimes. Moreover, the innate bias was incredibly apparent, because the entirety of this media was focused on the acts and thoughts

of the criminals. An example of this is that each episode focuses deeply on the thoughts, motives, and actions of the main characters in order to understand why they committed the crimes.

The four latter documentaries seemed to have similarities in how the primary intention was to shock viewers by showing them pieces of the criminal justice system that is rarely shown. For instance, in *Evolution of a Criminal*, the documentary is entirely focused on one individual and how his experience in prison affected him and his family. This points to a very narrow focus and causes a generalization to be made on how all families are affected by this. Moreover, the documentary, while powerful, does point several fingers at the upbringing of the main character and his family. In other words, the documentary covertly sheds light on how lower income families can be more susceptible to a life of crime, and that is what seems to have happened to the main character. While in *Hard Time*, the series explores the treatment of inmates as disciplined soldiers in the hope that it will rehabilitate their behavior, there are also clear themes that show the prisoner's lives outside of prison and the effects of that. The perception of the inmates is that they are in desperate need of reform and are out of control. Although each episode only shows a small facet of the problem that the correctional facility sees, it is apparent what the series is attempting to prove. This expected outcome is attempting to sway viewers to believe that inmates are dangerous and have to be greatly reformed. Moreover, this means that as human beings, the more we hear about a subject unknown to us, the more we believe that is true. Therefore, as the documentary continually discusses how inmates need strict reform, the more viewers will believe it. While some inmates may be dangerous, the large majority of inmates are only in correctional facilities and prisons because of a non-violent drug offense.

In contrast, in *Inside the World's Toughest Prisons*, the narrator explores similar types of themes and stereotypes in prisons all across the globe in an attempt to compare and contrast the practices. Because of the nature of the series, it is difficult to pinpoint and narrow down how the series can positively or negatively impact American viewers. One way to decipher it is through the lens of comparison. The viewers are able to see how inmates in other countries are treated and they can make an informed decision about how that comparison affects inmates in America. Moreover, they are able to see the practices of other countries' criminal justice systems and decide if there are apparent problems with our system. On the other hand, they may view inmates from other countries as more civil than in America and this can reinforce pre-existing stereotypes. These stereotypes are based on a system of race and class differences, where there are very distinct lines between those in power and those who are not.

Unfortunately, most minorities tend to fall into the category of little power and they reap the consequences of it. They are seen as less than, as animals, and are subsequently placed in an era of new-age slavery that takes place in prisons. A primary example of this is in *I am a Killer*, there is an in-depth look into inmates who specifically committed murders. The series explores each inmate's mindset before and after their term on death row. Moreover, some of the inmates who share their story are incredibly blunt about their feelings and their actions. For instance commentary about this revolves around "We discover their motivations, their expectations and ultimately how they now view the crime, after time spent on death row" (Nolan, 2019). Because of this, it is easy to see how viewers could be swayed very negatively into believing a generalization common among all inmates on death row. While some inmates may have no remorse for their crimes, there are some inmates who do; there are also inmates who maintain



their innocence while on death row. While this in-depth look into this documentary is valuable, the main goal seems to steer far from the primary goal of being informative. The outcomes resemble more reinforced notions of what inmates in prison are without giving the inmates much room to discuss their own stories.

### **Conclusion**

The significance of these findings suggest that although there may be implicit bias in each and every media source, that does not devalue the meaning that the viewer will take away from the outlet. More specifically, this means that not all viewers will have a negative opinion of the criminal justice system after viewing these documentaries, which is one takeaway from the research. Another main takeaway is the similarity between the structures of the prison documentaries examined. Most documentaries seem to begin with a shocking incident, then viewers get more details on what led to the initiation of the problem, and then the solutions are attempted to test the hypothesis; depending on the show, there was a specific ending. Further research needs to be done to link the high rates of viewers to either positive or negative progression for criminal justice reform.

For some documentaries, like *13th*, the active decision to use facts and scholars rather than actual inmates to depict the inmate experience can be more effective than relying heavily on conscious choices to air scenes reflecting the negative actions of inmates. Examples of this are how the majority of the documentary is facts spoken by prominent figures about prison life, rather than inmates discussing their own experience. Although this is beneficial, because the figures have more influence than the inmates would, the inmates stories are still not being shared

accurately. Additionally, this research shows that the popularity of a documentary does not necessarily reflect that the effect on the viewer will be based on less informative media. This research is necessary to add to the current conversation surrounding media and the criminal justice system, because there is a negative stigma surrounding the relationship of the two entities (Mason, 2003). Altogether, this should provide a useful perspective on the most infamous documentaries surrounding the depiction of prison life. In the future, this could be used to advance proactive thinking in regards to biases in filming. More importantly, with an important issue such as this one evident in fictional television and movies, it is imperative that unbiased information is given out to the public. If the research continues, it may be necessary to evaluate the statistics surrounding progressive criminal justice reform and documentaries such as these.

Moreover, it is important to note the value that historical implications on our criminal justice system have created. Minorities have continued to be disenfranchised by the system, and there should be more of a focus on how our criminal justice system regards drug charges towards minorities as criminal without considering the racial, mental, and health implications it places on society. These drug charges are a large portion of why minorities are overrepresented in the justice system, as discussed in the literature review. The racial implications are that minorities are incarcerated at higher rates for the same charges as their white counterparts due to none other than the discriminatory practices that our criminal justice system was founded upon. Examples of this can be seen in the majority of the documentaries, because many choose to portray minorities in a negative light. The mental implications revolve around how minorities live in a state of constant fear of being arrested or imprisoned for drug charges and charges surrounding minor crimes. Examples can be seen in *Evolution of a Criminal*, *Girls Incarcerated*, and *13th*.

Although this research is vital to take steps towards solving the problem, in the future this research should continue to push the boundaries on the social norms of the justice system.

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